

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 28  
Number 4 *Summer*

Article 11

---

1975

# Silent Victory: The U.S. Submarine War Against Japan

Steven Ross

Clay Blair Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ross, Steven and Blair, Clay Jr. (1975) "Silent Victory: The U.S. Submarine War Against Japan," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 28 : No. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol28/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## 88 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Blair, Clay, Jr. *Silent Victory: The U.S. Submarine War Against Japan*. New York: Lippincott, 1975. 1071pp.

During World War II, American submarines sank over a thousand Japanese merchant ships. By late 1944 the submarines had imposed a virtual blockade of the Japanese home islands, seriously hampering the Imperial war effort. Moreover, the subs accounted for a large number of enemy warships including one battleship, eight aircraft carriers, three heavy cruisers, and eight light cruisers.

Clay Blair, Jr., in his massive study of American submarines in the Pacific during the Second World War, traces the story of American undersea warfare from its modest origins to its spectacular triumph.

The origins were indeed modest, for as the author clearly demonstrates, American submarine forces were at first seriously hindered by tactical, personnel, and material problems. Before 7 December 1941, the United States had sworn in various treaties never to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare. After Pearl Harbor, Washington ordered an immediate resort to commerce raiding, but American submariners had devoted their prewar efforts to learning how to attack enemy warships. Consequently, they lacked the training and doctrine to conduct an effective *guerre de course*.

Prewar training had also emphasized extreme tactical caution with the result that many commanders were insufficiently daring and aggressive. Command problems coupled with the defective Mark XIV torpedo drastically reduced the effectiveness of American submarines throughout the war's first year.

Blair also points out that the Americans had a number of positive assets, including well-designed boats and many first-rate officers. Inefficient Japanese depth charges enabled many American subs to survive extended attacks.

Finally, the Americans possessed

Japan's naval codes (as early as the 1920's, code breakers had been working on Japanese diplomatic and naval ciphers. Agents even burglarized a Japanese consulate and photographed some codebooks). Throughout the war, the code breakers were able to supply American surface and submarine forces with accurate and invaluable information on Japanese war and merchant ship movements.

With monumental detail, Blair describes American efforts to solve the problems besetting the submarine fleet and devise effective tactics and material. Initially, the Americans lacked a strategy for Pacific submarines, split the submarine mission between attacking warships and commerce raiding, and consequently did little harm to Japan's war effort. By 1943 the submarine force learned how to fight and had obtained the men and equipment to do their job. Leaders of the submarine force finally began to deploy their boats along known shipping lanes and concentrated primarily on sinking merchant shipping. Japanese losses doubled, imports dropped sharply, and Japan's shipyards could no longer keep pace with the losses. In 1944 the submarine war became devastatingly effective. American submarines sank more ships than they had in all of the previous years and drastically impeded Japan's shipping services.

Based on massive documentary evidence, Blair has told a fascinating and important story in minute detail. Throughout his book he provides bold, clear assessments of the performance of America's naval commanders. Many will disagree with his judgments, but both the narrative and the assessments will provide fruitful material for thought concerning the vital subject of undersea warfare.

STEVEN ROSS  
Naval War College